

3rd SUNDAY OF EASTER – A (April 23, 2023)

What a powerful account of that first Easter day we just heard! Luke tells us about two of Jesus' disciples who were going to Emmaus 'that very day, the first day of the week'. Earlier that day, some of the women followers went to Jesus' tomb; there they were told that Jesus had risen as he had promised. Anyway, these two disciples going to Emmaus are joined by the risen Christ but they don't recognize him right away. He explains to them from the scriptures—Moses and the prophets—why things had to happen as they did. Then, on reaching Emmaus, Jesus blessed and broke bread, gave it to them...they then realized it was in fact Jesus, whereupon he disappeared.

Remember: all this happened on that very first Easter Sunday—the very day of Jesus rising from the dead. This Emmaus story should sound quite familiar to us: not simply because we have heard or read it before, which of course we all have. But the sequence of events here should remind us of something we engage in today. Jesus explains to them what the scriptures said about him; he explained to them the word of God; what we might call a kind of 'liturgy of the word'. Then he blessed and broke bread and gave it to them...which sure sounds a lot like a sort of 'liturgy of the Eucharist'.

From nearly the beginning, the Church has understood this Emmaus story at least in part as a reference to what happens during the celebration of the Eucharist, the Mass. This same general outline—an explanation of scripture followed by the breaking of bread—was soon made much more explicit. Around the year 155 A.D., St. Justin Martyr wrote to the Roman emperor of that time and described to him what Christians did. Let me share just a few excerpts from this remarkable letter:

1. "On the day we call the day of the sun [i.e. Sunday], all...gather in the same place. The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read...When the reader has finished, he who presides...challenges them to imitate these beautiful things." This is exactly our current Liturgy of the Word—we read from both Old and New Testaments, especially the gospels ('the memoirs of the apostles'), and then the leader urges those present to follow that teaching. It's what we call the homily or sermon.

2. "Then we all...offer prayers for ourselves and for all others"—sure sounds like the Prayers of the Faithful that we offer after the homily, doesn't it?

3. "Then someone brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren. He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father...and for a considerable time he gives thanks...When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all present give voice...by saying: 'Amen.'" Sure sounds like the preparation of the gifts and the Eucharistic prayer, doesn't it?

4. "When he who presides has given thanks and the people have responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the 'eucharisted' bread, wine and water and take them to those who are absent." What does 'eucharisted bread/wine' mean? That which was offered and consecrated into Jesus' Body and Blood during the Eucharistic Prayer...just as happens every time we celebrate Mass together. Sure sounds like the Communion rite, doesn't it?

Keep in mind: St. Justin wrote this letter just a little over 100 years after the time of Jesus' death and resurrection—very early in the life of the Church. And he did so to make clear what was one of the most important elements in the life of those earliest Christians—the celebration of the

Eucharist that Jesus instituted at the Last Supper and at which he told the apostles to ‘do this in remembrance of [him].’ No wonder the Church puts such a great emphasis and importance on the Mass, the Eucharist, and links it so strongly to our Easter faith in Jesus’ rising from the dead:

1. In the beginning, the ‘breaking of the bread’ (i.e. the Eucharist) was celebrated on ‘the first day of the week’—Sunday, the day of Jesus’ resurrection. Soon thereafter, the Eucharist was celebrated on the other days as well, but it began on Sunday.

2. We are obliged to take part in Holy Mass on Sundays—the day of resurrection—unless excused for a serious reason. You recall that during the worst of COVID, you were dispensed from that obligation...but that dispensation was removed almost two years ago and the obligation is back in place.

3. Another one of the Precepts of the Church directs us to receive Holy Communion, at the very least, once a year—and during the Easter season (what some of you may remember as one’s ‘Easter duty’).

I remind you of these things to highlight this most important connection between two of the central elements of our Catholic Christian faith: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the regular celebration of the Eucharist as the most important and powerful reminder of our Easter faith. In the current issue of Our Sunday Visitor, one columnist wrote well about this Emmaus gospel and about his love for the words spoken by the two disciples to Jesus when it looked like he would leave them. They simply said “Stay with us.” He calls those words a prayer, and he’s right about that. Let’s offer that same prayer to Jesus; let’s ask him every day to ‘stay with us’. Jesus certainly desires to do so, and he has the power to do so; his rising from the dead and his gift to us of his Body and Blood in the Eucharist prove that beyond any doubt. Stay with us, Lord, so that our own hearts may burn within us with an ever greater love for you and an ever greater desire to follow you.